

## Get More Out of Your Meetings

Doesn't it seem like people spend almost as much time complaining about meetings as they do attending them? Most people think that meetings are boring, a waste of time or even downright painful. Your teams and even your clients may grumble and moan their way through meetings, or worse yet, they may mutiny, refusing to attend more meetings.

Despite all this bad press, meetings can be a great way to solve problems, come up with ideas and move projects along. So, how do you get great value out of meetings? Here are the PureProject Group's Meeting Rules. Pin these up on a wall in your room and review them every time you schedule a meeting.

## Before the Meeting

1. **Don't call a meeting every time a problem comes up.** Just because Jim is confused about a specific project requirement or your client can't decide which version of the website design they like the best, doesn't mean you need to call a meeting! Be sure there is no other way to address your problem.
2. **Good meetings have a purpose.** If you call a meeting to solve a problem or discuss an opportunity, then by the end of the meeting you should have either resolved the problem or identified next steps that will get you close to resolution.
3. **Use email or online message boards to address preliminary or side issues before meetings begin.** By holding related conversations before the meeting you can get people up to speed immediately and reduce distractions during the meeting.
4. **Decide who needs to attend the meeting.** Don't invite people unless their input is needed. Too big a peanut gallery is annoying, and it wastes the peanuts time. Spend some time thinking about key attendees. If the goals of the meeting require team or invitee sign off, be sure they have enough information to make those decisions during the meeting.
5. **Create an agenda.** Even a ten minute check-in meeting needs structure. An agenda tells everyone what to expect in the meeting and when the meeting will be over. An agenda also documents what topics will be covered and who will lead which part of the discussion.
6. **Make sure key participants are prepared.** Go over the agenda with key participants (the client and team leads for example) in advance. Make sure they know how much time they have and what is expected of them. Modify the agenda based upon their feedback.
7. **Assign a moderator.** The project lead should not be the moderator. Leaders always have things to say and information to provide. A moderator is often someone who isn't a key contributor to the project. For particularly important meetings, an outside moderator can be a huge help.

8. **Assign a note taker** Do this before the meeting starts so that the note taker or takers are prepared for this role. If at all possible, the note take should not be the moderator or person leading the meeting.
9. **Set the meeting time in advance.** Make sure everyone can attend and remind people a day or two before the meeting. Email calendar programs are great tools for scheduling meetings.
10. **Be prepared.** Wasting people's time while you run to get documents or make copies is downright rude! Being prepared says you value people's time. Make sure participants have time to read or review relevant documents. Don't dump a 100-page document on your team an hour before a meeting and expect useful comments and feedback.

## During the Meeting

1. **Control the seating.** For long or crucial meetings, seat people in locations that ensure focus and participation. Don't put all the quiet people in one corner and don't let the troublemakers sit next to each other.
2. **Feed people.** Drinks and snacks are a great way to keep people alert. Food and drink are also a courtesy, they tell people you care enough about them to make sure they don't faint from hypoglycemia or have to rush out of the room when their stomach rumbles.
3. **Take useful notes. Don't** try to write down every word out of every person's mouth. Try to focus on the big picture, document key decisions and next steps. Your notes will be more organized and your hand will hurt less this way.
4. **Keep things moving.** This is the moderator's job. The moderator needs to watch the clock and gently nudge long-winded speakers along. This person can also break up arguments and keep the discussion on point. Moderators need to be tough. Think about this when you ask someone to moderate a meeting.
5. **Make sure everyone in the room participates.** Big talkers often dominate meetings, while quiet people with good ideas are not heard from.
6. **Use an idea "parking lot" to keep people on track.** People often want to say what they want to say, regardless of relevance. The moderator should put issues outside the scope of the meeting in the parking lot. The parking lot can be a white board where these "important for another day" issues are written down. The parking lot notes are attached to the meeting notes and may become the basis for a breakout session or later meetings. Or, they quietly fade away. Which is fine, no one's feelings are hurt and the meeting moves forward.
7. **Next steps and action items need owners.** Don't just assume that someone will follow-up on an item. Make sure to go over the action items and next steps at the end of the

meeting and assign completion or follow up dates to all the tasks. Confirm these agreements when you distribute the meeting notes.

8. **Don't criticize.** Group meetings are not the place to shoot down ideas or criticize performance.
9. **Take breaks and know when to stop.** An eight-hour meeting is too long. Most people can't go more than four hours without a significant break. It's better to spread meetings out over several days than to try and finish everything up in one marathon session.

## After the Meeting

1. **Meeting notes** need to be distributed within one day (that's 24 hours) of the meeting. Otherwise, everyone will forget everything they agreed to.
2. **Make a backup copy of the meeting notes, just in case.** Confusion over agreements made in meetings is common. Since no one remembers what they agreed to verbally, copies of written notes are important. Printing out a copy of the notes for your master project binder is a great way to make sure you have those notes on hand when questions come up three weeks after the meeting.
3. **Check in with action item owners.** Don't just assume people will deal with the issues they took on in a meeting. People may agree to anything, just to get out of a meeting. Make sure to check in regularly, otherwise, you'll have to call another meeting to review the next steps you set up in the first meeting.

## Summary

That's it. These easy to implement rules should keep your meetings run smoothly. One last tip; don't forget to add extra time to your schedule for meetings and meeting prep.